

Sudan Party Puts New Face on Fundamentalism

By Jonathan C. Randal
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KHARTOUM, Sudan—Hassan Turabi, doctor of laws from London University and the Sorbonne and a likely contender to assume the leadership of Africa's largest country, conveys an aura of political sophistication that defies the western image of a devout Islamic fundamentalist.

As head of the National Islamic

Front, a party claiming to represent the world's 700 million Moslems, Turabi likes to proclaim, "We are the only modern political party in the Sudan."

To an amazing degree, political friend and foe in Sudan agree with him. The party appears open, urban, decidedly middle class in aspiration and it is led by a western-educated elite. It puts out position papers, holds timely news conferences and subsidizes cadres' car purchases.

On the surface, the NIF has little in common with the rejection of the material world motivating the Islamic revolution in Shiite Iran or the ascetic Egyptian fundamentalist underground that assassinated

president Anwar Sadat in the name of mainstream Sunni Islam in 1981.

But the NIF shares with other Islamic fundamentalist movements an appeal to those who want a break with the past because they feel betrayed, or bypassed by events, and the traditional politicians running the country. Sudanese have watched their once prosperous country steadily decline from breadbasket to basket case.

But the wretched-of-the-earth theme is not one the 56-year-old Turabi stresses. Traveled, witty, eloquent in English and French as well as Arabic, Turabi sings the praises of Sudanese society's tolerance and attachment to democracy which, in an interview, he said

helped explain why the NIF was different.

"Ours is not a typical Islamic party," he said, "completely alienated because of political repression, therefore secretive and underground, separate and despairing of society, seeking to develop a virtuous group and ultimately take power by force from the outside rather than through reform from within."

But echoing widespread doubts about the NIF's commitment to democratic practice, Bona Malwal, editor of the English-language Sudan Times, said Turabi was a "wolf in democratic clothing."

Other critics are worried by the NIF's use of street demonstrations

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Sudan Party Moderates Fundamentalism

SUDAN, From A35

and the press to attack adversaries. One intellectual remarked, "The NIF has refined political intimidation to the point [where] Joseph Goebbels would be envious."

The party is active in banking, insurance and real estate, a considerable attraction for job seekers in this depressed economy. Yet Turabi is accused of cornering commodity markets, hoarding grain and meat, contributing to famine in this drought-prone country, tax dodging and blackening the image of the private sector.

"The profits of these robber barons are obscene," a European diplomat remarked, "and religious leaders in Saudi Arabia, the font of Moslem jurisprudence, do not regard Turabi and his financial dealings as falling within the spirit of Islam."

Turabi's politics, too, provoke dispute. He played a crucial role in one of the country's most divisive decisions in recent times.

While foreign affairs adviser to then-president Jaafar Nimeri in September 1983, Turabi was a driving force behind the imposition of a particularly rigid brand of sharia, or Moslem law, here.

The so-called September laws exacted severing of hands and feet for some offenses and were applied not just to the Moslem majority in the north, but also to southerners who are either Christian or animist. At one point, Turabi felt obliged to say the laws had been applied hastily, but now insists that the foreign outcry "created a great deal of Islamic consciousness among the masses."

Reaction against sharia proved a powerful recruiting agent for American-educated Col. John Garang, a southern Christian who had raised his Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement in revolt the previous March.

The refusal of successive Khartoum governments to abrogate the laws remains one of the most important obstacles to ending this latest phase in north-south fighting—which has occurred in all but 11 of Sudan's 32 years as an independent state.

Turabi, thanks to his party's 51 members in the 268-seat Constituent Assembly, has paralyzed the attempts at abrogation of the laws under Prime Minister Sadiq Mahdi, who is both his principal political rival and his brother-in-law.

"We are there to remind his fol-

lowers," Turabi said, "against any temptation to disestablish Islam. Sadiq cannot get away from that."

Turabi acknowledged his luck in being jailed less than a month before Nimeri's 16-year rule ended in an April 1985 uprising organized by Khartoum's democratic-minded business and intellectual elite. The brief incarceration spared him the prosecution and sterner punishment that was the fate of many of the fallen president's closest associates.

"Turabi felt his way very slowly during the first months of the ensuing transitional regime," said Prof. Mohammed Bashir Hamid, chairman of Khartoum University's History Department and then information minister. "His confidence grew as his challenges went unanswered."

Despite his proclaimed attachment to democracy, Turabi readily conceded that his political ambitions were "given a tremendous push forward" by the autocratic Nimeri, who ended Turabi's years of political exile in 1977.

Turabi befriended Saudi Prince Mohammed Faisal, who was close to the fundamentalist group that killed Sadat, the Egyptian Moslem Brothers, in the late 1970s.

In 1982, Turabi was instrumental in obtaining from Nimeri a special dispensation setting up the Faisal Islamic Bank with tax holidays and other special privileges. The Saudi prince never succeeded in obtaining a bank license at home.

In late 1984, Nimeri accused the Faisal Islamic Bank of hoarding grain during a severe famine, and a central bank report said the bank had made a 44 percent return.

Two years later, Faisal Islamic Bank, which provides an office for

Turabi in its new headquarters, had become the biggest private bank in Sudan, strong enough to defy Sadiq Mahdi's determined efforts to prosecute it for tax fraud.

"There is so little control of any sort in the Sudan," said a European diplomat, "that it is easy for the energetic, persistent and clever to get round the rules." Prof. Bashir said such fears prompted him to worry about the impact of so much money wielded by a "highly organized party in a country which is not."

Particularly annoying to the intelligentsia, which played a leading role in the return of democracy, was Turabi's use of an election-law loophole allowing the NIF to capture 23 of the 28 seats reserved for university graduates.

Even if graduate seats are eliminated in the next elections, scheduled for 1990, Turabi predicts the NIF will become the first or second biggest party, supplanting the prime minister's Umma and its Democratic Unionist partners.

"If, God forbid, the democratic regime collapsed," Turabi said, "we still think we would have a powerful impact. If there were no elections, we would be even more powerful."

Turabi said the suspicions of him in Saudi Arabia and other Islamic centers have all but disappeared. But a member of a prominent Egyptian think tank, here to study Sudan, reflected the uneasiness that Turabi still evokes even among those most subjugated by his charm.

"I will never stop praising God," the Egyptian was quoted as saying, "that we do not have somebody like Turabi in Egypt. I shudder to think what he would do if he came to power in Cairo."